

Pauline Ecology and Sustainable Environmental Development of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

Sustainable environmental development can only take place in the context of a peaceful, secured and beneficial environment. The increasing concern about environmental issues in Niger Delta region of Nigeria provides the basis to biblically construct sustainable pro-environmental behaviour. Therefore, the paper contextually interrogates Pauline ecology, and synthesizes it with the environmental issues of the Niger Delta using the personal agency variable of the social cognitive theory of pro-environmental behaviour. Pauline ecology affirms that the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ, which is the restorative re-creation of the entire universe, is integral to ecological balance. In essence, human and non-human components of the environment are headed for transformation, and not for destruction. Therefore, Pauline ecology impinges responsibility on the human components of the environment to take conscious action to foster sustainable, climate-healthy and nature-changing activities in and on the environment of the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Pauline ecology, Sustainable environmental development, Redemption, Creation, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is a visionary development paradigm championed by the United Nations. The issues which are often explored in sustainable development, as stated by Odejide (2010), are the acquisition of different forms of knowledge which have the capacity to transform our modes of living, the quality of our lives and the future. Ayeni (2010) writes that the United Nations asserts that the components that work together to produce sustainable development are economic development, social development and environmental protection.

Notably, among the above identified three pillars of sustainable development, a sustainable environmental development is critical and takes prominent place because economic development and social equity can only take effect in the context of a peaceful, secured and beautiful environment. As such, there is the necessary prominence of environmental issues all over the world with Nigeria not an exception. This scenario is evident in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The long period of environmental neglect of the Niger Delta has made the cliché “poverty amidst prosperity” to be the region’s descriptive appellation.

1.1 *Statement of the Problem*

Some scholars have focused on the Pauline texts explicating Paul’s theology of creation and redemption without their corresponding ecological ramifications (Boettner 1980; Gordon 2007; Lincoln 1990); while some others that have espoused Paul’s theology of creation and redemption in relation to a positive environmental attitude have not linked it to the environmental issues in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Zerbe 1992; Bishop 1991; Newport 1958; Furnish 1984; Martin 1974; Berry 1999; Bruce 1980). But a cursory look at some Pauline texts show that Paul’s theology of creation and redemption can be related to each other in a way that it develops a positive ecological attitude toward the environment as located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This aspect of the cosmic and earthly dimensions of God’s redeeming acts is often overlooked or minimized in Christian Theology. Hence, pertinent questions arise at this juncture. What does the Pauline ecology say to guide our response to the problems of ecology in relation to the environment? In what way(s) can we apply Pauline ecology to the environmental issues of the Niger Delta? And will the activities in the Niger Delta region conserve the environment or will it lead to degradation and thereby put the position of future generations in a precarious situation? The answers to these questions are the focus of this work.

1.2 *Objective of the Study*

It is the task of this article to contextually interrogate Pauline ecology, which is hinged on Paul’s teaching on creation and redemption, and then synthesize it with the environmental issues of the Niger Delta. This objective is carried out through a contextual interrogation of the Pauline eco-texts, which involves the exegetical analysis of Pauline texts referencing environmental concerns, and content analysis of literature discussing the ecological implications of Paul’s theology on creation and redemption. Current concern over the state of the environment and the attendant effects of the abuse of the environment of the Niger Delta, resulting from intensity of oil explorations and production provides the context for an ecological engagement with the Pauline eco-texts.

1.3 *Theoretical Framework*

The task of this article is carried out using the personal agency variable of the social cognitive theory of pro-environmental behaviour as domiciled in the field of environmental psychology. The personal agency variable of this theory has been described as the capacity of individuals to intentionally choose, execute, and manage their own actions to actualize expected outcomes (Bandura 2010). The utmost challenge of this objective is to develop a few hermeneutical insights as can be gleaned from Pauline ecology and invariably Christian theology, in relation to present environmental concerns in the Niger Delta. Then, we would be able to hear “a word” that addressed our “world” from the Bible.

2. **Sustainable Development and the Environment**

Sustainable development, according to the *Brundtland Commission* of the United Nations, is “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (*Our Common Future* 1987). The United Nations assert that the components that work together to produce sustainable development are economic development, social development and environmental protection (Ayení 2010). It is the effort geared towards finding better ways of doing things, both for the present and the future.

Out of the 17 sustainable development goals contained in the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development agreed upon in August 2015, 9 goals (53%) have to do directly or indirectly with the environment. Environment, within the context of sustainable development, has been considered the total surrounding which includes natural, biological, and human resources and their interactions with each other (Oshwofasa *et al* 2012).

3. **The Niger Delta and Environmental Issues**

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria spans over 70,000 square km, being made up of nine states (Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Ekiti and Ondo) divided into 185 local governments, and comprising of 800 communities. It makes up 7.5% of Nigeria’s land mass (Oshwofasa *et al* 2012). According to Raji and Abejide (2013), the region is rated as the most oil – impacted environment and polluted area in the world. About 31 million people of many ethnic groups, speaking some 450 dialects, live in the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta is located in the Atlantic coast of southern Nigeria and is the world’s second largest delta with a coastline of about 450 km which ends at Imo river entrance (Kadafa 2012). The region is an incredibly well-endowed ecosystem, which contains one of the highest concentrations of biodiversity on the planet, in addition to supporting abundant flora and fauna, arable terrain that can sustain a wide variety of crops, agricultural trees, and more species of freshwater fish than any ecosystem in Africa (*Environmental Issues* 2009). As stated by Bisina (2005), the Niger Delta serves as the economic nerve center of Nigeria with its vast oil deposits.

However, this is how far the good part of the story goes. The unsustainable oil exploration and exploitation activities that have been going on in the Niger Delta over the years since the first discovery of crude oil in January 15, 1956 at Oloibiri in Ogbia Local Government Area, Bayelsa State by Shell Darcy (now Shell – BP Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited) has adversely affected people inhabiting the region (Etuonovbe 2009). Some of these negative effects are the unsuitability of the land for agriculture; fishing areas and waters have become polluted and unproductive; very low quality water and edible water animals; militancy; coastal erosion that washes away farm lands; low level of infrastructural development; increased vulnerability and poverty from declining livelihood; massive destruction of the mangrove forest; and depletion of terrestrial and marine resources (Etuonovbe 2009). Also, Kadafa (2012) affirms that gas flaring within the region has caused fire outbreaks destroying plants, animals and causing human fatalities and acid rain that have added to the loss in biodiversity. This situation has resulted into the struggle for the emancipation of the region as seen in the activities of various militant groups and violent clashes between the different ethnic groups and between them and the government.

Oil exploration and exploitation in the area has further impacted on the built environment. The life span of roofing material in the Niger Delta is relatively shorter than any other part of the larger Nigerian polity as a result of the frequent deluge of acid rain, which is partly a consequence of gas flaring. And at the slightest tempest, buildings in the area begin to collapse (Oshwofasa *et al* 2012). The Niger Delta terrain has been overrun through deliberate over-exploitation carried out in total disregard of the principles of sustainable environmental management.

Though, there had been intervention efforts in the past to address the environmental issues in the region through the setting up of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) by the Federal Government; the utilization

of technology by the government and non-governmental organizations to identify the source and movement of oil spills; the Federal Government's amnesty programme; and the use of bioremediation to clean up oil sites. Yet, these measures have become like a drop of water in the ocean compared to the magnitude of environmental issues in the region. Also, corruption, politicization of socio-economic processes and militarization in the region has not made the aforementioned efforts to bear appropriate fruits.

4. Pauline Ecology

Paul's hermeneutics, as stated by Beker (1989), challenges every interpreter of the Scriptures to a task of constructing the relation between the center of the gospel and its necessary embodiment contingent situations, in such a way that the abiding word of the gospel can become a word on target for us. Thus, it is not out of place to relate Pauline ecology to environmental issues in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria with the aim of sustainable environmental development.

Ecology has been defined by Conrad (2007) as "the study of how living things and their environment interact with one another". The word "ecology" comes from "*oekology*", which is derived from the Greek οἶκος (*oikos*), meaning "house, habitat" and λογος (*logos*) meaning "word". Thus, an ecological concern refers to giving care for the world, which is our household, by perceiving the relationship that exists within this dwelling place between different organisms, that is, plants, animals, birds, fish and human beings, and the natural environment (Kanagaraj 1998). Ecological theology is an attempt to retrieve the ecological mission of Christianity as a response to environmental threats.

Paul's teaching on creation and redemption gives us a grasp of his ecology. Paul's teaching on creation is put thus by Daly(1989): God is the source of all things; God as the Creator, is separate and distinct from His creation; all of creation belongs to God; all of creation is good; should be thankfully received and meant for the good of human beings; and humanity is inextricably linked to the earth (cf: Acts 14:14ff; 17:24ff; I Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:15-16; 1 Timothy 4:1-5). Paul upholds the ownership of God over all creation, humans and non-humans alike (cf. 1 Timothy 6:13, 17). As Armeding (1973) opines, all biblical perspective on ecology must begin with a biblical view of God.

Paul's perspective of creation being made for Christ, in, through and for Christ, and all of creation being held together in Christ (cf. Colossians 1:15-17) remain an ecological perception. In 1 Corinthians 15:21-28, Paul hints that when God's and Christ's kingdom is finally realized throughout the universe, there will be no more separation between the earthly and heavenly realms (cf. Romans 11:36). And when Paul cites Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (NLT) in 1 Corinthians 10:26, a steward attitude towards the non-human components of creation is implied (Zerbe 1992). That is, as God's delegates, we are to take care of God's creation on his behalf because humanity is accountable to God (Bishop 1991).

In essence, when creation is restored, people are redeemed to whole, bodily life, and non-human creation is set free from the bondage it is suffering under the weight of evil (Zerbe 1992). This view impinges on humans the greater responsibility to preserve and nurture the natural environment in which they live. Also, Paul's statement that creation is longing for the revealing of the sons of God and is groaning for their final redemption (cf. Romans 8:19, 23) hints that humans are cooperators with God in maintaining the ecological resources of the earth (Kanagaraj 1998). This Pauline theology of promised cosmic liberation highlights nature as part of God's redemptive plan and action (Newport 1998; Gregorios 1987).

God's redemptive act in Christ was done through the incarnation and through this Christ entered into a vital and personal relationship with human nature (Boettner 1980). Paul maintains that Jesus Christ has ushered in a "new creation" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15), reconciled the "world", (2 Corinthians 5:17-19; Colossians 1:20), and that the new humanity is "being renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10; Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:24)(Furnish 1984; Martin 1974; Lohse 1973; Bishop 1991). So, the redemptive work of Christ cannot be confined to the spiritual sphere alone. It has a cosmic dimension, which include the right relationship with the non-human components of creation. By implication, the present material universe will be transformed and not be annihilated to be replaced by a new universe (Bruce 1983).

In essence, Pauline ecology emphasizes that humanity is bound in relationship with every other component of human existence. Since God's redemptive purpose in Christ, implied by Colossians 1:20 comprises of everything in creation, human beings, therefore, are to care for the non-human components of creation. And the Greek word used by Paul for God's plan of salvation in Ephesians 1:10 is *oikonomia*, a cognate of "ecology" (Kanagaraj

1998), is likewise used for stewards. This word implies God's stewardship in ordering and administering the universe (Lincoln 1990). Stewardship has been defined as "preserving this world as a habitat fit for humanity", while the steward's task is "responsible development" (Derr, Nash and Nuehaus 1996). There is nothing reductionist about stewardship, as suggested by some people. Stewardship brings liberation for creation and humanity because in it they are both fulfilling their God-given roles (Bishop 1991). Paul taught that we have the freedom to use the resources of this world, but we must "steward" them for the benefit of all people. Environmental stewardship is done on the basis of applying the Christian faith to the day to day issues of life.

5. Pauline Ecology and Sustainable Environmental Development in the Niger Delta: A Synthesis

Paul's theology of creation and redemption provides an integrative approach consequent upon attitudinal change that encourages a true sustainable environmental development. He depicted that the redemption of creation encompasses both humans and other interacting components of the creation – a true definition of ecology. The theological reference of the word "creation" is semantically different from the scientific reference. The theological reference is about the relationship between God and all that is not God (Daly 1989).

Therefore, since the corruption of creation was integrally related to the human fall, the redemption of humanity naturally leads to the redemption of God's universe. Then, our missiological emphasis should also incorporate ecological concerns. The whole bedrock of environmental care is that God is the creator of heaven and earth.

Pauline ecology inspires us to be eco-friendly and the environmental challenges of today, mirrored by the situation in the Niger Delta, should move us to re-examine our Scripture and traditions, in search of truths that might help this generation save the environment. An appropriate attitudinal relation to the environment will create a sustainable environment because present action will have secured a better future. As Ohlman(2009) posits:

If we take care of the world of the present, the future will have received justice from us. A good future is implicit in the soils, forest, grasslands, marshes, deserts, mountains, rivers, lakes, and oceans that we have now. We must be a community that treasures our past, guards our present and secures our future.

Thus, the role of those who live in the Niger Delta region and other human components in relationship with the region is less exploitation and more servant hood responsibility for the environment. The environment is God's creation, and as God's delegates and stewards, we are to care for the environment on God's behalf and to refrain from oppressive use of the environment. This is the theocentric perspective to sustainable environmental development. The whole premise of stewardship, as Bishop (1991) asserts, is that the earth has been given to humanity because of God's love and concern for nature. This imposes a redemptive responsibility on Christians and other human components of the environment.

Hence, our accessing and participating in Christ's redemption behooves on us the responsibility of environmental care such as combating deforestation; industrial pollution; the extinction of species both in water and on the land; poor sewage systems; consumerism; wastage of food, water and oxygen; destruction of the ozone layer and many other environmentally destructive activities. Therefore, the activities of oil corporations in the Niger Delta region that has led to the destruction and degradation of the Niger Delta environment must be monitored, controlled and checked by the Federal government with heavy remedial sanctions when abuse occurs. This should go beyond word of mouth or the granting of amnesty to militants.

Also, Christians in the Niger Delta must come out of their indifference to environmental issues. As pointed out by Pui-lan(1992), indifference to environmental issues leads to the breaking down of the great chain that connects human beings and other parts of creation – our ecological crisis. Some modern Christians consider other places apart from the church buildings ("God's house") as places of desecration. Hence, they are not bothered about creation, and subsequently the environment. Imperatively, according to Berry (1999), it is impossible to assign "holiness" exclusively to the built church without denying "holiness" to the rest of creation. Paul, preaching at Athens, states: He is God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, He doesn't live in man-made temples.... For in Him, we live and move and exist... (Acts 17:24, 28 NLT).

We can therefore deduce from Paul's teaching on creation and redemption, in relation to having a sustainable environment in the Niger Delta, that the imperative of Christian action in relation to the environment and human participation in it is based squarely on God's present and future redemption activity. Analogously, the

implication is that humans are to have lifestyles that exhibit care for the environment as appropriate to God's act of cosmic recreation. By extension, the ethics of peacemaking, peace building, and non-violence should be embraced in humanity's relationship to and use of the Niger Delta environment in order to actualize a sustainable environment.

6. Recommendations

As a result of contextually interrogating Paul's teaching in creation and redemption in synthesis this with the environmental issues in the Niger Delta, and using the personal agency variable of the social cognitive theory of pro-environmental behavior, the following actions are recommended:

- (1) The preparation of a workable and time-bound master plan and strategies for the remediation of the impacts of the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. This should be at the behest of collaborative efforts of the federal, state and local governments in Nigeria, the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region, the community leaders, and non-governmental organizations advocating for environmental sustainability.
- (2) The restoration of the ecosystem of the Niger Delta region to pristine conditions through a total clean-up of the physical environment as recommended by the United Nations.
- (3) The adoption of practical and sustainable poverty alleviation measures that will win the support and confidence of the generality of the people of the Niger Delta.
- (4) The massive development of infrastructure and social amenities in the region rather than the giving of financial amnesty to selected groups of people or militants.
- (5) The provision of free or subsidized formal education for the youths of the region from primary to tertiary level and the provision of skilled vocation for those not desirous of formal education.
- (6) The adoption of a policy of sustainable environmental development which involves the judicious use of the natural resources such that the carrying and productive capacity of the environment is not over-exploited.
- (7) Christians, churches and Christians based organizations of the Niger Delta can form advocacy groups built around environmental issues in the region, engage in environmental campaigns, and establish poverty ameliorating measures for the people.
- (8) Seminaries, Universities and other institutions of higher learning in Nigeria should provide curricular programmes and provide teaching that encourages knowledge and care of the environment. The aim is to enable the growth of earth keepers, both in the habits of everyday life and in provision of leadership for the care for the environment.

7. Conclusions

This article has analyzed and interpreted Pauline ecology in light of the environmental conditions of the Niger Delta. Pauline ecology is hinged on his teaching about creation and redemption and the Bible is replete with creation affirming passages. Paul taught that the redemptive act of God in Christ, which is the restorative re-creation of the entire universe, both human and non-human, is integral to ecological balance and this perspective of holistic redemption motivates Christians to act as stewards of the natural world. In essence, human and non-human components of the environment are headed for transformation, and not for destruction. Our attitude towards the environment should mirror God's intention to see everything reconciled to him. Therefore, Pauline ecology impinges responsibility on the human components of the environment, Nigerians inclusive, to take conscious action to foster sustainable, climate-healthy and nature changing activities in and on the environment, most especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

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